

# Shibboleths Among Believers

by Zac Poonen

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*Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the dangers of rigid terminology among believers and the importance of focusing on a personal relationship with Jesus over specific phrases or doctrines.*

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 4:10

**Topics:** "Christian Unity", "Eternal Life"

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## Description

Zac Poonen discusses the danger of creating 'Shibboleths' in Christianity, where certain theological terms become tests of belonging to a group, leading to division and harm. He emphasizes that the essence of the Christian life is not in specific phrases or terminology, but in partaking of and manifesting eternal life - the life of Jesus. Poonen highlights the importance of focusing on fellowship with the Father, enduring the cross for the joy set before us, and following Jesus Himself rather than just a doctrine or technique.

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## Transcript

In the days of the judges in Israel, the Gileadites devised an unique method of testing who belonged to their camp and who didn't. They asked everyone to say the word "Shibboleth". Their enemies, the Ephraimites, would pronounce this as "Sibboleth", and that was sufficient to seal their doom. 42,000 Israelites were killed by their brothers because they did not pronounce one syllable correctly (Judges 12:6)!!! During the last 20 centuries, various Christian groups have devised their own "Shibboleths" to identify those who belong to their group and those who don't. All those who cannot "pronounce" the Shibboleths (the acceptable theological terminology of the group) correctly are slain - with the sword (in the Middle ages), and with the tongue (in these more civilized days). Good believers have been destroyed psychologically and by blackmail in these times, just because they could not pronounce the acceptable Shibboleth of a group, and because they were too weak to stand up to the strong soul-power of the group's leaders. It is certainly not by the use or non-use of a particular phrase that we identify whether people have the correct doctrine or not. Consider the phrase "the dying of Jesus" (2 Cor.4:10). That is not necessarily the only way of expressing the truth that that phrase represents. Jesus spoke of it as "taking up the cross daily" (Lk.9:23). We are all in danger of becoming slaves to a particular terminology, rather than becoming bondslaves of Christ.

What would you think of an apostle who never once spoke of "taking up the cross daily" in any of his writings? Would you accuse him of ignoring the centrality of the cross? If so, you would have to accuse Peter, John, James and Jude of such a deviation, because they never once use this phrase in any of their

writings. Paul himself talks of "the dying of Jesus" only once in all the letters that he wrote. Was that because Paul did not emphasise the centrality of the cross in his ministry? It would be blasphemy to think so - for it was the Holy Spirit Who inspired all of Paul's letters in Scripture! John certainly bore the cross every day. But when he speaks of the Christian life in his first epistle, he speaks of it in a positive way - as partaking of, and manifesting eternal life - the life of Jesus. "We proclaim to you the eternal life," he says, "which was with the Father and was manifested to us" (1 Jn.1:2). Eternal life - the life of Jesus - is the one theme of all the epistles, and in fact of the entire New Testament. And this is what we should be proclaiming in every meeting of the church. We must not use human logic when we come to the Scriptures. Such logic is all right in mathematics, but not with God's Word. When we come to God's Word, it is best to put aside the clever arguments of human reason and to accept Scripture exactly as it is written. God has given us His perfect revelation in His Word. And if the New Testament Scriptures speak of "eternal life", we must speak of that. Remember that Jesus "for the joy set before Him, endured the cross" (Heb.12:2). He did not enjoy the cross. He endured it. And He endured it because of the joy set before Him - the joy of fellowship with the Father in whose presence is life and fulness of joy (Psa.16:11). The Father dwelt in the Most Holy Place (of the Old testament temple), and the only way into that place was through the rent veil (symbolising the crucified flesh). Jesus died to His own will daily and thus fellowshiped with the Father. But Jesus did not concentrate on crucifying His will. His goal was fellowship with His Father. His goal was life, not death.

Our goal too must be LIFE - the same as Jesus'. We do not follow the way of the cross. That would be following a technique! We follow Jesus - Who walked along the way of the cross. We run the race, not looking at a doctrine, or even at the way, but at a Person - JESUS HIMSELF (Heb. 12:2). People who always think and speak of "Death to Self" tend to become negative in many ways, and end up being negative to other human-beings too. We have seen numerous examples of this. Does this mean that we should not preach about taking up the cross? No. But the truth about taking up the cross does not have to be proclaimed, by using this very phrase each time. The letter kills. It is the spirit that gives life. A brother's message may contain the spirit of the cross, (as the entire New Testament does), even if he does not use that phrase (the letter) even once in his message. If we are spiritually minded, we will listen to his spirit - and not just to his words. It would be totally wrong to imagine that a brother has not understood the centrality of the cross, just because he does not use your particular "Shibboleth". The apostles did not follow a rule-book (the tree of knowledge of good and evil) to decide what phrases to use and what not to use, when writing Scripture. They spoke out of the abundance of their hearts and from their lives, and expressed spiritual truths with the words that came to them naturally. The Holy Spirit did not pour them all into one mould and make them all use the same expressions and phrases. "The wind blows freely where it wishes.....so is everyone born of the Spirit (every child of God)" (Jn.3:8). Bondage comes through following human rules and regulations. The apostles were free to express even Divine truth in their own language. Only cultists compel their adherents to use the same phrases used by their leaders. This results in cultists becoming like programmed robots who do not have any individual contact with God and no boldness to use language that comes naturally to them. They blindly and dumbly imitate their leaders. We must certainly avoid the many un-Scriptural expressions that are common in Christendom. We must also be careful not to use Biblical expressions carelessly.

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